

NORTH CAROLINA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION



AS I SEE IT

Keeping Students Excited and Engaged

October 26, 2009

Who can forget their first day of kindergarten? For some children it's scary meeting new kids and being in a strange place. For others, the first day of school is exciting. They are not quite sure what is going to happen when they get there but they know it must be something fun!

As students progress through elementary and middle school and finally to high school, what happens to the excitement they felt about that first day of kindergarten, and first year of school? When do students lose their zest for knowledge and the adventure each new school day brings? Why do they become disengaged from learning? What's different about the students who manage to stay excited about learning and new opportunities?

Keeping students excited and engaged in their studies is one of the biggest challenges educators face in our schools today. What changes must we make so students come to school each day with an enthusiasm for learning and a desire to participate in their education - no matter where they are in their educational career?

If you walked down the hallways of any high school today, you would find that classes and instruction haven't changed much over the years. Core courses, such as English, Algebra, and U.S. History, are still being taught, and teachers are still lecturing in front of the classroom even though so much in our culture and workplaces has changed. To better engage students we need to account for these differences and make fundamental changes in how we teach and how we allow students to learn.

A number of high schools have been redesigned to accomplish just that. Learn and Earn early college high schools allow students to take college-level courses so that when they graduate, they not only receive a high school diploma but also two years of transferable college credit or an associate's degree.

You also can find high schools across the state that have specific academic themes such as Engineering, Health Sciences and Technology. These specialty schools appeal to students by offering smaller learning communities and providing better focus and relevancy for their learning.

The North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS) has leveled the "learning" field for all students with its varied and extensive online course selection. Rural students now have the same access to classes as those who live in urban areas. The NCVPS enables students to take honors, Advanced Placement and unique courses such as Mandarin Chinese, as well as credit recovery courses unimpeded by schedule and other constraints.

Yet even with these academic opportunities we still need to look at the basic issue of instruction and how we engage students in the classroom.

Learning should be relevant and compelling to students. We need to consider all tools and media as possibilities for meeting this objective. For example, in Onslow County and Forsyth County, students are using Smartphones to supplant Algebra instruction. Early evaluations show that this has been successful. IMPACT schools have shown us that Smart Boards, Ipods (MP3 players), podcasts and other technology tools can make a difference in student learning. And, at the end of the day, there is no substitute for teachers who are enthusiastic about their coursework and know how to convey that enthusiasm to their students.

I'm committed to exploring ways at the state level to make learning relevant and compelling so that all of our students look forward to coming to school each day, just as they did on that first day of kindergarten.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bill".

Bill Harrison, Chairman
State Board of Education